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SUBJECT: FORUM FOR THE FUTURE: REGIONAL MEDIA FOCUS ON REFORM AGENDA

¶11. Summary: In contrast to the American press' focus on the November 12 Forum for the Future's failure to issue a final communiqu, characterizing it as "ending in discord" over Egypt's objection on the role of NGOs, the Bahrain and regional media highlighted the broader importance of the Forum's reform agenda. Overall, commentary portrayed Egypt's objection as an isolated blunder, and recognized the unprecedented nature of the dialogue taking place between civil society and BMENA governments. End Summary.

¶12. Government-owned daily newspapers Al-Ayam and independent Al-Wasat both ran pull-out sections on the Forum for the Future, which featured background information on the Forum and explained its objectives. The two pull-outs gave full coverage to press roundtable discussions with EUR A/S Fried, DRL A/S Lowenkron, and ECA/DAS Romanowski in addition to the one-on-one Al-Wasat interview with NEA/DAS Scott Carpenter.

¶13. Regional coverage of the Forum was broad and thorough. Secretary Rice's interview with Arab satellite network Al-

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Arabiya constituted the main news item throughout the day November 12 every hour on the hour starting with the noon news bulletin. Prominent Arabic and English regional dailies carried significant reporting on the Forum and Secretary Rice's statements, including Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, Al-

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Hayat, Al-Riyadh, Gulf News and Khalij Times. All local Arabic and English dailies and Al-Hayat covered the launch of the Fund for the Future and Foundation for the Future. According to regional reports, the Forum closed with summary documents of the main pillars discussed instead of the "Bahrain Declaration" after some Arab countries led by Egypt expressed reservations over funding and supporting unregistered NGOs by the Foundation for the Future.

¶14. Al Wasat also reported statements by Secretary Rice criticizing Syria for its human rights record and calling on Damascus to release all Syrian political detainees, including Kamal Labwani. Al-Wasat described the statement as part of the U.S. campaign to isolate Syria internationally.

Commentary Highlights Importance of Reform

¶15. Esmat Al-Mousawi, leading columnist in Al-Ayam, asserted that Arabs need the West to fix and reform what they have been incapable of fixing for decades: "Yes, some Arabs claim that the Forum is one more way for the West's interference in our internal affairs. And yes, there is a bit of truth in that, but reality says that Arabs have always asked the West for assistance throughout history so why not ask its assistance with reforms?! All we should do right now is invest all the foreign initiatives to our advantage but without closing our minds and eyes, so we are not manipulated whether from outside or inside our countries."

¶16. Abbas Busafwan, of Al-Ayam, echoes the need to take advantage of international initiatives on reforms and democratization even if "we oppose the policies of those countries." He adds: "The wheel of reforms has started spinning and the people are capable of investing the international climate to push for more reforms. However, reform will be more streamlined when the people and regimes agreed on the pace of reform and its form."

¶17. Mansoor Al-Jamri, of Al-Wasat, asserts that the Foundation for Future will mark a new beginning on the road of reforms in the region if it is administered by independent and honest members who work on distributing the funds equally among the various NGOs in the region. Competition between countries wishing to host the Foundation headquarters also shows the importance and the authority it will give the host country.

¶18. Ali Saleh, of often anti-U.S. policy Akhbar Al-Khalij, believes that the Forum for the Future was a great success even though participant countries failed to issue the

"Bahrain Declaration." He explains: "The Forum succeeded in enhancing partnership between governments and civil society institutions. It made the governments listen to the demands and aspirations of their peoples through the NGOs that attended. Even the reservations raised by some countries is a success on its own because it pointed out the countries that desire reform and the countries that do not want reform from the outside or inside."

19. On November 14, Al-Wasat quoted a government source denying the Forum was a failure because a "Bahrain Declaration" was not announced as widely reported in the American and European press. Sources added that there was no political failure between Bahrain, the United States, and other G8 countries. There was disagreement between some countries that opposed the declaration that included articles granting Foundation for the Future the right to support all civil society institutions directly including institutions that are unregistered officially. Sources explained that Bahrain will participate in a meeting in Jordan next month to draft the charter of the Foundation for Future. It is expected that the "Bahrain Declaration" will be announced during that meeting.

10. Government daily Al-Ayam reported that Bahraini Foreign Affairs Assistant Undersecretary Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa revealed that a meeting would be held before the middle of 2006 to form board of directors for the Foundation for the Future to establish conditions and criteria for supporting NGO activities. Shaikh Abdul Aziz pointed out that the Foundation will allow the financing of activities of civil society institutions but not the activities and programs of political societies. He emphasized that political societies' law in Bahrain bans foreign financial support to political societies.

11. In the one negative commentary to date, Sayed Zahra of the pro-government nationalist Akhbar Al Khalij, referred to a statement by a U.S. official at the closing of the Forum, widely quoted in the Western press, "we are frustrated and not pleased." Zahra comments: "the reason of course is the reservations raised by Egypt and some Arab countries on an article about the support offered to NGOs. The American frustration and anger show that America was holding bad intentions and hiding its goals and objectives behind supporting NGOs. America wants Arab countries to accept unregistered NGOs whereas it put many restrictions on Islamic charity funds and NGOs in America. The reality is that America wants to support outlawed NGOs. They want to see chaos in our countries to facilitate the merger of Israel in the Broader Middle East and North Africa and abolish the Arab identity."

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